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SUBJECT: META USES ELECTORAL REFORM TO HIS ADVANTAGE

REF: TIRANA 174

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ilir Meta, Chair of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) party, has increased public attacks on opposition leader Edi Rama as he has worked to build a stronger political base outside of the opposition Socialist Party (SP)-led coalition. Following his public break-up with the SP coalition earlier this year, Meta has maintained a strong stand against Rama. Rama appears to be unconcerned, focusing instead on portraying a statesmanlike attitude throughout NATO integration, the Gerdec crisis, and negotiations on electoral reform. Working in tandem on electoral reform, the SP and Democratic Party (DP) will almost certainly best the small parties on this issue in a Parliamentary vote expected early this week. However, Meta shows no signs of submission. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Following the rupture with SP earlier this spring (reftel), Meta moved publicly to solidify a base among the smaller parties, inviting those from both the left and right to work with him to counter the SP-DP agreement on electoral reform, an issue of primal importance to the small parties. He secured support from Paskal Milo, Chair of the Social Democratic Party (PDS), and Neritan Ceka, Chair of the Democratic Alliance Party (PAD), both from the SP coalition, but initially did not win over any majority parties.

13. (SBU) As the battle continued, however, Meta has become the strongest advocate for the continued existence of the small parties and all the smaller parties of both blocks are now united against the packet expected to be voted this week. (This consensus is not due solely to Meta's efforts, but he was the early instigator.) Meanwhile, Rama and PM Berisha have held steady with their agreed course on electoral reform, which will eliminate at least some of the smaller parties. These parties have no independent base, and exist essentially at the patronage of the two major parties -- the so-called "dyshk phenomenon." Without the parliamentary seats and ministerial positions made possible through political deals struck with the leader of their coalition, small parties have no means to maintain or accrue political power on their own.

14. (U) Electoral reform is important to the small parties since it would, in its likely form, eliminate the avenues through which these political chits are paid out. The current package proposes constitutional amendments that would change the system from majoritarian to regional proportional. Each regional district would have a set number of MPs based on population, and voters would have only one ballot, voting by party. Party candidate lists would be put forward in advance by party leaders, with no additions, subtractions or re-rankings possible. In practice, smaller parties would be unlikely to win parliamentary seats outside of the major population areas and the larger parties would have less incentive to manipulate the system through the dyshk phenomenon. A widely criticized and much-used aspect of the current electoral process, dyshk has ensured the survival of small parties, especially the tiny

ones with one-two members nationwide. Through this system the two major parties have been able to give votes to the smaller entities in their respective coalitions. Without it, most will be eliminated, with the only certain exception of LSI, as Meta enjoys both an independent political base and national name recognition.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Secure in the knowledge that electoral reform will not eliminate his own party, Meta's strong political ambition has driven him to search out ways to exploit electoral reform for potential gain. Championing the rights of small parties could throw him more support if some choose to defect from either major coalition following the approval of electoral reform and cast their lot with LSI. If they do not defect to Meta and are provided a greater incentive by the DP or SP to join with them instead, Meta could come away from electoral reform in need of another strategy to increase his influence at the national level. END COMMENT

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